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The Paradox of German-American Assimilation[1]

The experience of German immigrants in America has been a paradoxical one. Despite contemporary census reports and public opinion surveys which record the survival of some distinctive ethnic traits among persons of German ancestry, despite scattered rural areas and urban pockets where traces of German roots remain evident, most Americans would agree with Andrew Greeley that "if ever an American ethnic group vanished, it is the Germans."[2] Yet German-Americans once possessed one of the most visible, complex, and vital of American ethnic cultures, and nourished a strong ethos of separatism. How did so highly structured and sophisticated an ethnic culture disappear so completely? This article will briefly consider the historiography of this issue and its implications for current conceptual models of immigrant assimilation.

Early scholars did not perceive this paradox. For Faust, Fairchild, Wittke, assimilation was the normal fate of any immigrant group, Germans included. Though Faust noted that Germans were "tenacious of their social customs and principles of living," he also observed that their assimilation was "rapid almost to a fault."[3] But if Germans were assimilating so rapidly, why did they provoke the fierce anti-Germanism of the World War I period? John Hawgood attempted to confront this problem by arguing that the theoretically normal course of German assimilation had been "somewhat abruptly checked" in the 1850s by American nativism which "at a crucial period in their [the Germans'] development as an immigrant people, lessened their will to cooperate in American life, and tended to produce what became known as the hyphenated or German-American." Only the trauma of the First World War, Hawgood argued, shook loose the hyphen and brought about the delayed "completion of the Americanization of the German stock."[4] This interpretation still finds wide currency,[5] despite Hawgood's failure to take into account widespread evidence for German assimilation even in the pre-World War I period and despite subsequent scholarship that has made it clear that ethnic cultural defense of the type found among the Germans has been by no means abnormal among American ethnic groups.

By contrast, Heinz Kloss, writing at the same time as Hawgood in the 1930s, perceived that assimilation was proceeding apace even in the late nineteenth-century heyday of organized *Deutschtum*. He argued that such ethnic loss was an inevitable consequence of the size and heterogeneity of German settlements. These attributes nourished first generation communal strength but equally insured long-term Americanization by fostering factionalism, multiplying contacts with the native-born, weakening unified leadership, and provoking nativist attack.[6] The crisis which this created within German-American communities by the end of the century has been documented more recently by such scholars as Frederick Luebke, Guido Dobbert, and Philip Gleason.[7] Their work suggests that as halting immigration, suburbanization, and second-generation assimilation weakened the bonds of German community, the more recent lower-middle-class immigrants who dominated German organizational life embarked upon an almost pathological search for an issue to rally numbers behind some institutional focus, which they found first in opposition to prohibition, then in wartime pro-Germanism. When this somewhat artificial German cultural revival collided with renewed American cultural aggressiveness, the outcome only hastened and completed a community disintegration that was already well underway.

What makes this process of cultural disintegration paradoxical—assuming that this interpretation of the German-American experience is correct—is the current state of theory interpreting the immigrant experience in America. The so-called "ghetto model" of the emergence of ethnic culture, worked out by progressive-era social scientists and poetically recast for historians by Oscar Handlin, describes a process whereby impoverished peasants, upon exclusion from American society, formed their own communities to serve as psychological buttresses against the disorder and anomie of slum life and as economic and political bases for movement up and out of the ghetto and into the American mainstream.[8] But how then to explain the emergence of ethnic culture among a group like the Germans bound together neither by common peasant origins nor common poverty? The ghetto model postulates an almost inevitable assimilation; but efforts to replace or supplement it with one better able to account for the only too evident survival of ethnic distinctiveness in contemporary American society tend to leave the Germans in an equally paradoxical position. Milton Gordon, in his widely cited explanation for the durability of ethnicity, maintains that ethnicity has survived despite acculturation (or behavioral adaptation) because structural assimilation (or integration into the primary networks of nonethnic society) has not occurred for many members of many groups.[9] This implies that ethnicity could be expected to survive as long as there are communal settlements and institutions which bind group members to one another. Adopting this reasoning, Andrew Greeley has argued that only a catastrophe the size of World War I could destroy so deeply institutionalized an ethnic culture as that which the German-Americans had created.[10] Yet the German evidence suggests that this assumed link between community strength and resistance to assimilation was by no means so straightforward as such theory implies. A brief enumeration of some distinctive characteristics of German-American communities—

particularly urban ones—as they emerge from recent historical research, underlines this paradox which the German experience appears to pose.[11]

Preeminent among these German community characteristics is the familiar immigrant organizational life, which in the German case included from the outset cultural, social, and political associations, as well as the mutual benefit and religious organizations more common to the early stages of immigrant settlement in America. This can probably be better understood as a direct transfer of the *Vereinswesen* developing at the time in the homeland than as an innovative adaptation to the breakdown of the primary community in America, the more usual interpretation.

This *Vereinswesen* rested upon a second typical attribute, an unusually diverse occupational structure. Particularly in the large midwestern cities where Germans were found in numbers on all but the highest rungs of the economic ladder, they represented a microcosm of an urban society and not just a segment of it—a microcosm sufficiently varied to support an elaborate set of organizations and for a time to retain even the most urbanized and successful within the bonds of the ethnic culture.

Thirdly, not only class but also dialect and religion differentiated German community members from one another, although such internal differences have been more frequently deduced from their political and institutional consequences than directly documented. Little is yet known about the selective attraction of different communities in America for persons from different areas of Germany or about variations in the regional and religious composition of the various German-American urban communities.

Fourthly, Germans by the middle of the nineteenth century exhibited some of the strongest patterns of residential clustering recorded for any American ethnic group, despite a wide spectrum of occupations and rent-paying abilities that theoretically should have encouraged residential scatter in the era before mass transit. Such residential propinquity permitted ready access to community institutions, maximal use of German, and an easy, natural sense of community. But it is also clear that these residential clusters were dispersing rapidly by 1910 if not earlier.

A fifth characteristic was the factionalism that diversity entailed, factionalism which at least had the advantage of focusing interest on common personalities and issues and thereby creating a sense of participation in a vital and complete community. But without institutionalized ways of channeling factionalism into community decision-making (i.e., without political autonomy), such a community remained amorphous, its interests difficult to define to outsiders, its members difficult to mobilize as a voting bloc.

A final common feature was a commitment to certain cultural interests centering around aspects of community life shared by all factions and alien to Yankee culture—a relaxed and enjoyable Sunday, a glass of beer, the sanctity of the traditional home, pride in things German. The best indication of the strength of these interests in defining the limits of the consensual community can be found in German voting patterns, with their lack of unanimity except when such interests were attacked; these same records also provide some of the strongest evidence for community division when subgroup rather than ethnic cultural interests were more salient.

While the scattered studies from which I have derived these characteris-

tics are insufficient to firmly document an urban German community type distinct from that of any other group, they do seem to delineate an immigrant community quite different from the stereotypical immigrant ghetto, with a degree of diversity and institutional completeness sufficiently high to secure for newcomers a social environment similar in many ways to that which they might have encountered in a contemporary city in the fatherland. Members shared enough to give the community a single external identity based more on culture than on class or primary association. Primary loyalties within the community could be given to family, church, and other sub-groups without precluding recognition of membership in a broader German community which appears to have existed very early. Presumably such a heterogeneous and neighborhood-based cultural community eased initial accommodation to American life by providing needed services within an insulated environment, simplifying individual choices and cushioning contact with the outside world in ways not possible in the community postulated by the ghetto model.

In Gordon's terms, this would seem to imply retarded acculturation and, by extension, retarded assimilation, yet this is evidently not what occurred. Although much of the rapid Americanization noted by contemporaries undoubtedly went no further than loss of language and other forms of acculturation, declining membership in ethnic associations must have been mirrored by the kind of increasing interaction with old stock Americans that meant an important step toward assimilation. Germans also seem to have felt that acculturation, particularly language loss, left them peculiarly vulnerable to full community dissolution, since culture rather than common interest was their only bond. Yet not even the most tightly structured community could eliminate the contact that brought cultural change—in schools, on the job, in politics, through the spread of mass popular culture. As members gradually acquired American values and behavior, German organizations themselves subtly changed and became first German-American, then fully American. A ghetto demands movement beyond its bounds, institutional as well as physical, to confirm assimilation; but in the large German settlements, the community itself could assimilate with its members. During the transitional period, the relatively high status of German culture may have permitted a kind of bi-culturalism, as essentially assimilated persons moved back and forth between German and non-ethnic cultures, adopting at will the behavior of either—or even assimilation with only partial acculturation—possibilities not considered by most theory. This ended when war and prohibition raised the stakes of biculturalism too high, and in any case American culture subsequently co-opted stances that had previously served to define the boundaries of much of German culture. As the external signs of a clearly defining culture disappeared, so too did an ethnicity whose only base was culture. Had it been linked more strongly to a single class or a common predicament, it might have survived longer.[12]

I am thus suggesting that ethnicity defined by common culture rather than common interest may explain how community strength could lead to deethnicization rather than to the ethnic maintenance postulated by assimilation theory. There is increasing realization among scholars that acculturation proceeds differentially in different areas of behavior and belief,

that American society itself has not upheld a single standard of behavior for acculturation, and that considerable residues of ethnic culture remain among socially assimilated individuals. David Schneider has postulated a process of change in the very basis of ethnic identity itself, a "desocialization" of ethnic groups as they lose structural significance and become transmuted into "primarily cultural-symbolic groups."[13] Ethnicity so defined in cultural terms—presumably the product of parallel but independent transmission within families without the imposition of the disappearing structured ethnic community—at some further point may or may not recrystallize into the more formal solidarity of an interest group vis-à-vis other elements of society. Such a recrystallization, however, has thus far not occurred in the German case and shows little sign of doing so.

Much of the argument which I have tried to briefly sketch will remain hypothetical without further research. Let me conclude by suggesting several problem areas which I regard as most critical. Central is the necessity of comparing German settlements in a variety of cities over longer time periods to avoid the problem of generalizing from single case studies of Milwaukee, Cincinnati, or any other community. If data were collected systematically for a variety of communities on such measures as residential segregation, occupational structure, types and membership in ethnic organizations, ethnic newspaper circulation, political voting and office-holding, intermarriage, etc., and related to variables descriptive of the broader urban setting, a typology could be constructed that would help determine the relative roles of size, priority of settlement, economic heterogeneity, the development of a high as well as a folk ethnic culture and so on in the emergence and survival of German ethnic communities. It would also encourage systematic comparison with the experience of other ethnic groups.

Of course, large numbers of Germans made their adaptation to America in settlements where they were a small minority, and others chose to "pass" as individuals rather than to move with the group. Thus estimates are also needed of the numbers and characteristics of those who did and did not identify with the ethnic community over time, a research strategy that could also provide a test of the thesis of second-generation disaffiliation. The relationship between the institutional and the residential communities in the city—between those who belonged to German organizations and those who resided in German neighborhoods—also needs probing. There have been few attempts even to estimate proportions of the German urban population resident in ethnically concentrated, mixed, or dispersed settings at single points in time, let alone estimations of changes over time. Migration choices—from Germany to America, from one community in America to another, even from one part of a city to another—have also received little attention, yet played an obvious role in community formation and survival or dissolution.

So far I have not referred to rural settlements. This omission reflects the minimal concern for rural history among historians in general and of the German immigration particularly.[14] Yet if a real German culture has survived anywhere, it is in the densely German rural areas of the midwest and

plains states. There is evidence that not only the religious base of many of these settlements but also a relatively successful adaptation of German customs of family farm operation and inter-generational land transfer played a large role in maintaining such communities, an issue that deserves more research. Among the many other unanswered questions concerning the rural adaptation process is the rate and direction of the out-migration necessitated by unusually high birth rates and structural changes in American agriculture, and its resulting role in forming urban German cultures.

Part of the distinctiveness of German-American history lies in the strength of its high culture. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that so much more attention has been given to the *Vereinsdeutschen* than to the more numerous *Kirchendeutschen* or to what one might call the *Kneipen-deutschen*. Only recently, under the influence of newer conceptions of church history, has there been much attempt to approach religion, for example, from a social history viewpoint as an adaptive agent. German utilization of labor organizations, political machinery, schools, etc. could be approached within a similar conceptual framework. The patterns of leadership recruitment and changing German perceptions of the function of ethnicity itself likewise require careful documentation.

My final point concerns the measurement of assimilation itself. It would seem obvious to consider not only the distance travelled toward the host society but distance travelled from the culture of the homeland. Historians are increasingly distancing themselves from Handlin's conception of an unvarying peasant culture with uniform consequences for American adjustment,[15] but few treatments of Germans pay much attention to the cultural milieu which produced them. Too often the easy compatibility of German and American values is assumed,[16] despite evidence to suggest, for example, rather different family values, and despite the frequent German-Yankee conflict over cultural rather than structural or power-related issues.

Finally, concern for German cultural backgrounds should require greater sensitivity to regional and class differences in nineteenth-century Germany, and more systematic attention to the German backgrounds of immigrants in any given American setting, which, I realize, involves difficult problems of data linkage. But it also offers the challenge of comparing the fates of immigrants not just against native contemporaries as is the present practice, but also against their own individual points of departure and against the fate they might have expected had they either remained in their home area or migrated elsewhere in Germany. Such a matched comparison should permit a measure of migration effectiveness on the individual level as well as a conceptually more satisfying index of the cultural change which constitutes Americanization.

Such research strategies should illuminate not only the process of German assimilation but our understanding of the immigration experience more generally. For if the paradox I have posed is real, then its resolution will come not through the rewriting of German-American history, but by adjusting our conceptual models of assimilation and acculturation so that

they can more satisfactorily interpret the case of this largest of immigrant groups than is presently the case.

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Notes

1. This article was originally presented as a paper at the Third Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, April 28, 1979. For a more extended and fully documented version of these comments, see Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Die Assimilierung der Deutschen in Amerika: zum Stand der Forschung in den Vereinigten Staaten," in Willi Paul Adams, ed., *Die Deutschsprachige Auswanderung in die Vereinigten Staaten: Berichte über Forschungsstand und Quellenbestände* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 33-64.

2. Andrew M. Greeley, *Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), p. 117.

3. Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909); Faust, "German Americans," in Francis J. Brown & Joseph Slabey Roucek, eds., *One America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), p. 102; see also Henry Pratt Fairchild, *Immigration: A World Movement and Its American Sginificance* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1918), esp. pp. 72, 84, 94; Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1939), esp. p. 259.

4. John A. Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), esp. pp. 52, 251, xiv, 279, 296, 300. Note, though, that Hawgood did acknowledge that although Bismarck-era immigration hardened German culture in America "to an ironlike firmness in its mould," "cracks in the once solid structure" began to appear by the end of the century as newer immigrants encountered lessened nativism and older ones began to move physically out of German areas (p. 291).

5. E.g., Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution: The German Forty-Eighters in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), pp. 58-59, 181; Donald R. Taft and Richard Robbins, *International Migrations* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1955), pp. 463-69; Noel Iverson, *Germania, U.S.A.: Social Change in New Ulm, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), pp. 35-47; Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic America: A History of Immigration and Assimilation* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975), pp. 33, 48-55.

6. Heinz Kloss, *Um die Einigung des Deutschamerikanertums: Die Geschichte einer unvollendeten Volksgruppe* (Berlin: Volk und Reich Verlag, 1937); Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts, " in Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Language Loyalty in the United States* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), esp. pp. 211, 226-27.

7. Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974); Luebke, "The Germans," in John Higham, ed., *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 64-90; Guido A. Dobbert, "German-Americans between New and Old Fatherland," *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967), 663-80; Dobbert, "The Disintegration of an Immigrant Community: The Cincinnati Germans, 1870-1920," Diss. University of Chicago 1965; Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German-American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). For a recent summary treatment, see La Vern J. Rippley, *The German-Americans* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976).

8. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951); "Immigration in American Life: A Reappraisal," in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Immigration and American History: Essays in Honor of Theodore C. Blegen* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), pp. 8-24; see also his *Boston's Immigrants* (New York: Atheneum, 1968). For the sociological roots of the model, see, for example, Robert E. Park and Herbert A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920); William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958; reprint); see also Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Ethnicity: A Neglected Dimension of

American History," in Herbert J. Bass, ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), pp. 70-88; Robert D. Cross, "How Historians Have Looked at Immigrants to the United States," *International Migration Review*, 7 (Spring 1973), 4-13.

9. Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

10. Greeley, *Ethnicity*, pp. 297-302.

11. Studies of German ethnic communities include: Dieter Cunz, *The Maryland Germans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948); Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans* (Charlottesville, The University Press of Virgina, 1969); Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1949); Frederick Doyle Kershner, Jr., "A Social and Cultural History of Indianapolis, 1860-1914," Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison 1950; Audrey Louise Olson, C.S.J., "St. Louis Germans, 1850-1920: The Nature of an Immigrant Community and Its Relation to the Assimilation Process," Diss. University of Kansas 1970; Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-60: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); George Hellmuth Kellner, "The German Element on the Urban Frontier: St. Louis, 1830-1860," Diss. University of Missouri 1973; Frederick Anthony Hodes, "The Urbanization of St. Louis: A Study in Urban Residential Patterns in the Nineteenth Century," Diss. St. Louis University 1973; Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); JoEllen McNergney Vinyard, "The Irish on the Urban Frontier: Detroit, 1850-1880," Diss. University of Michigan 1972; Dean Robert Esslinger, "The Urbanization of South Bend's Immigrants, 1850-1880," Diss. University of Notre Dame 1972; Alan N. Burstein, "Residential Distribution and Mobility of Irish and German Immigrants in Philadelphia, 1850-1880," Diss. University of Pennsylvania 1975; James M. Bergquist, "The Political Attitudes of the German Immigrant in Illinois, 1848-1860," Diss. Northwestern University 1966; Laurence A. Glasco, "Ethnicity and Social Structure: Irish, Germans and Native-Born of Buffalo, N.Y., 1850-1860," Diss. State University of New York at Buffalo 1973; Theodore Hershberg et al., "Occupation and Ethnicity in Five Nineteenth-Century Cities: A Collaborative Inquiry," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 7 (1974), 174-216; Douglas V. Shaw, "The Making of an Immigrant City: Ethnic and Cultural Conflict in Jersey City, New Jersey, 1850-1860," Diss. University of Rochester 1972. For an interpretation of the literature on German urban settlements, see James M. Bergquist, "German Communities in American Cities: An Interpretation of the Nineteenth-Century Experience," German-American Symposium, St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia, December 7, 1975.

12. Cf. Colin Greer, "Remembering Class: An Interpretation," in Greer, ed., *Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 3-35.

13. Cited in Talcott Parsons, "Some Theoretical Considerations on the Nature and Trends of Change of Ethnicity," in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 66. See also R. D. Alba, "Social Assimilation among American Catholic National-Origin Groups," *American Sociological Review*, 41 (1976), 103-46; Charles Price, "The Study of Assimilation," in *Migration*, J. A. Jackson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 185-236; Greeley, *Ethnicity*; Daniel Bell, "Ethnicity and Social Change," in Glazer and Moynihan, *Ethnicity*, esp. p. 169.

14. For exceptions, see Arthur B. Cozzens, "Conservation in German Settlements of the Missouri Ozarks," *Geographical Review*, 33 (1943), 286-98; Terry G. Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966); Russel B. Gerlach, *Immigrants in the Ozarks* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976); Shafer, "Yankee and Teuton," *The Winnebago-Horicon Basin: A Type Study in Western History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1937); Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska 1880-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969); Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Farm and Family: A German Settlement on the Minnesota Frontier," American Historical Association annual meeting, Washington, D.C., December, 1976.

15. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "*Contadini* in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History*, 51 (1964), 404-17; Josef J. Barton, *Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Rumanians, and Slovaks in an American City, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

16. See, for example, two studies of Germans in colonial Pennsylvania: James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *Urban Village: Population, Community, and Family Structure in Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1683-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).